

SECTION 1- Microbiology

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This is the most important section in this manual. A thorough understanding of this section will provide a basis for the remainder of the publication.

Foodborne disease outbreaks in the United States are caused by the following (with percent frequency):

Bacteria - 66%

Chemicals - 25%

Viruses - 5%

Parasites - 4%

Chemicals are usually in solution and cannot be seen. Parasites involved in most outbreaks are very small and cannot be seen with the unaided eye. Bacteria and viruses are extremely microscopic. It would take millions of bacteria to produce a colony the size of the period at the end of this sentence. This many bacteria is more than enough to cause many people to become seriously ill.

1 A. SOURCES OF BACTERIA

Bacteria are everywhere in our environment. Most are harmless. Some are beneficial and are used to make foods, such as cheese. Others are spoilage organisms that sour and rot our food. A few become a threat to our health when they grow and reproduce. Sources of these bacteria are as follows: soil, water, air, dust, edible plants and plant products, animals and animal products, intestinal tract of man and animals, employee's hands and contaminated food utensils and equipment.

1 B. BACTERIA IN FOOD

A common misconception is that food is free of bacteria that cause foodborne diseases when it reaches the establishment or after processing. The following information suggests otherwise.

Red Meats. Concentrations of two types of foodborne disease organisms were found in 28% of pork sausage. Fresh ground beef in a recent study was found to contain three types of foodborne disease organisms.

Poultry. Poultry represents an important source of foodborne disease organisms. In one study 90% of the market-ready chicken and turkey were contaminated with foodborne

disease bacteria. In another study more than half of the poultry samples harbored two types of foodborne disease bacteria.

Seafood. The incidence of foodborne disease organisms in shellfish depends greatly upon the quality of water from which animals are harvested and handled. In one study, 47% of clams, mussels, and oysters were positive for enteroviruses. In another study, 33% of the seafood tested positive for organisms of salmonellosis.

Dairy Products. Milk is of little risk because it is pasteurized. However, postpasteurization contamination and adding ingredients to milk increases potential for outbreaks. Twenty percent of some cheeses are contaminated with disease bacteria. Unpasteurized dairy products present greater risk. Raw milk tested positive for a common disease organism in 48% of the samples taken.

Deli Foods. More than 95% of retail salads (chicken, egg, ham, macaroni, shrimp, etc.) in a recent survey were contaminated with low levels of a common foodborne disease organism. Sixty percent of sandwiches were found contaminated.

Dry Products. In a survey of dry sauce and gravy mixes, soup mixes, spaghetti sauce mixes, and cheese sauce mixes, 18% were contaminated with foodborne disease organisms.

Grains. Grains and granary products are commonly contaminated with bacteria. In one study, 100% of raw rice was contaminated with a foodborne disease organism.

Bakery Products. The surface of freshly baked bread products are practically free of microorganisms, but they are subject to contamination from the air during cooling and during handling. Filled pastries present much greater risk.

Vegetables. Raw vegetables are commonly contaminated with bacteria from the soil. For example, botulism causing bacteria were found in 12% of frozen spinach in one study. In another study, 46% of raw vegetables were contaminated with another foodborne disease organism. In another study, 26% of the fresh potatoes and 30% of fresh radishes tested positive for Listeria organisms.

1 C. HUMAN BACTERIA

Another common misconception is that healthy employees do not harbor bacteria. Humans have their own natural population of bacteria (part of the normal flora), and some are the variety that cause foodborne diseases. At least 80% of the population are carriers of bacteria that cause Clostridium perfringens food poisoning. Also, 30 to 50% of the population have staphylococcal food poisoning organisms in their nasal passage or on their skin. Of course, sick employees are carriers of great numbers of organisms that cause disease.

1 D. FACTORS INFLUENCING BACTERIAL GROWTH

Bacteria have specific nutritional and environmental needs in order to survive and reproduce. They are as follows: food, moisture, proper atmosphere, pH, temperature, and

inhibitory substances.

Food. Bacteria have various food preferences. Those of public health concern like the same kinds of food we like.

Moisture. There must be adequate moisture for bacteria to grow. The amount of moisture needed is defined by the term water activity (a_w). Fresh beef with a high a_w (0.99) will support rapid bacterial growth. However, cured beef jerky with a lower a_w (less than 0.85) will not.

Atmospheric Requirements. Some bacteria grow rapidly only in the presence of free oxygen; others require the absence of oxygen; some grow in both atmospheres and even others may have special atmospheric requirements. Cooking drives off oxygen; stirring, mixing, and beating foods introduce oxygen.

pH. The pH of the bacteria's environment is a measurement of the degree of acidity or alkalinity. The scale is 0 - 14. Most foods occupy the pH scale from 2.3 (which is acidic) to 8.0 (which is slightly alkaline). A pH of 7 is neutral. Most bacteria of public health concern grow best at pH values between 4.6 to 7.5. Examples of food pH are as follows (in decreasing order of acidity): lemons, 2.3; vinegar, 3.0; tomatoes, 4.2; bread and ground beef, 5.5; ham, 6.0; corn, 6.3; chicken, 6.4; milk, 6.5; fish, 6.8; pure water, 7.0; and egg white, 8.0. Mixing foods of different pH changes the pH of the mixture.

Temperature. Some spoilage bacteria grow best at refrigeration temperatures. Some others grow best at temperatures above 120°F. Those of public health concern grow best between 60° and 120°F.

Inhibitory Substances. Inhibitory substances from bacteria themselves, or as a natural ingredient of food or added during food processing may slow down, stop or inhibit growth of some bacteria or enhance the growth of others. Salted ham is a good example. Because of the salt concentration, spoilage bacteria growth is inhibited. However, the condition supports the growth of a common food poisoning bacteria.

It is important to understand these things in order to appreciate what influences bacterial growth, or why some foods support bacterial growth in one form but not in another.

1 E. BACTERIAL GROWTH

Bacterial growth refers to the increase in number of organisms. This is accomplished by cell division, whereby the bacterial cell splits to form two cells.

Bacterial growth can be very rapid but not until conditions are just right. There are four phases bacteria goes through. It is important to understand what takes place at each phase of the bacterial growth curve.

Lag Phase. When bacteria are introduced to food, there is an adjustment or lag period. During this time there is considerable biochemical activity but no increase in the number of cells. The lag phase can be from a few hours to days.

Log Phase. When conditions are right, rapid growth commences. This is called the log or

logarithmic phase because the bacteria double their number by cell division, some at a rate of every 20 minutes. This is generally not appreciated until it is graphically illustrated, like in the following example:

Example of Logarithmic Growth Rate

| Time | Number | Time | Number |
|-------|--------|-------|-----------|
| Start | 216 | 2'20" | 27,648 |
| 20" | 432 | 2'40" | 55,296 |
| 40" | 864 | 3'00" | 110,592 |
| 1'00" | 1,728 | 3'20" | 221,184 |
| 1'20" | 3,456 | 3'40" | 442,368 |
| 1'40" | 6,912 | 4'00" | 884,736 |
| 2'00" | 13,824 | 4'20" | 1,769,472 |

The above example demonstrates how starting with 216 bacteria and with a 20 minute doubling rate, after 4 hours, 20 minutes there would be over 1 million bacteria.

Stationary Phase. After a period of rapid growth, bacteria numbers reach the leveling-off stage as nutrients are used up and waste accumulates. Foods at this level and beyond are usually "spoiled" because of the bacterial activity and are generally unacceptable from a purely organoleptical viewpoint (flavor, aroma, appearance).

Death Phase. At this point, the food is no longer suitable for supporting growth and the bacteria die.

1 F. INTERESTING INFORMATION ABOUT FOODBORNE DISEASE CAUSATIVE AGENTS

Bacteria

- No foodborne disease bacteria will grow when temperatures reach freezing, but many survive. Most bacteria grow slowly at refrigeration temperatures (45°F or less), and growth rate increases with increased temperature. Good growth occurs at room temperature (about 70°F). Fastest growth for most bacteria occurs between 90° and 100°F. Several bacteria types survive higher temperatures, and a few can tolerate boiling for a short period of time.
- As few as two salmonellosis bacteria/teaspoonful of milk is sufficient to cause the disease. To cause some other foodborne diseases, as many as five million bacteria/teaspoonful or more may be required. Some bacteria concentrations in contaminated food may be 50 million or more/teaspoonful.
- Some foodborne disease bacteria form spores (protective shells) when conditions are not suitable for growth. These bacteria can live for a long time in the spore stage

in dry conditions, at adverse temperatures and during exposure to some chemicals. When conditions are suitable again, the bacteria grow.

- Some foodborne disease bacteria do not grow very well when other competitive bacteria (such as spoilage bacteria) are present. Cooking food kills spoilage bacteria in the food and contributes to the growth of foodborne disease bacteria.
- Some bacteria produce a toxin (poison). Cooking the food may kill the bacteria but will not destroy the toxin. However, botulism toxin is destroyed at 176°F for 10 minutes or boiling for a few minutes.

Viruses

- Unlike bacteria, viruses do not grow in food. Food only serves as a vehicle from the source of contamination to the consumer. The primary contamination source is man, either directly or indirectly.
- The two viruses commonly attributed to foodborne disease outbreaks are hepatitis A and Norwalk virus. Contaminated shellfish, uncooked foods and foods contaminated after cooking have contributed to a considerable number of hepatitis A outbreaks. Outbreaks of the Norwalk-like virus in uncooked foods is increasing throughout the nation. It is more resistant to destruction than hepatitis A virus.

Parasites

- The most common parasite involved in foodborne disease outbreaks is the trichinosis nematode. The disease is acquired from consuming raw or improperly cooked meat (primarily pork).
- Other less common parasites that are found in, or transmitted by, food are protozoans that cause giardiasis and amebiasis. Infected persons transmit the organisms to food via not washing their hands after using the restroom.

Chemicals

- Food accounts for 80-90% of the total human exposure to most chemicals from environmental sources. Fish poisoning (ciguatera and scombrototoxin) accounts for most of the reported outbreaks. Scombroid poisoning is most often a result of histamine production in fish which have been improperly refrigerated.
- Heavy metal poisoning occurs frequently when acid foods (such as lemonade) and carbonated beverages come in contact with such heavy metals as copper, zinc, antimony and cadmium.

1 G. SUMMARY

- Bacteria are so small that thousands in one spot cannot be seen with the unaided eye.
- Bacteria are everywhere. Most are harmless, some are beneficial and a few cause disease.
- Fresh foods may contain disease-causing bacteria.
- Three of the most essential requirements for bacterial growth are food, moisture and temperature.
- Bacterial growth is accomplished by cell division.
- When conditions are just right, bacterial growth can be very rapid and in a few hours the number can be in the millions.
- Foodborne disease bacteria will not grow at freezing, but some grow at refrigeration temperatures, many grow at room temperature, and the greatest growth is between 90° and 100°F.
- With some foodborne diseases, ingesting only two organisms is enough to cause illness. For others, thousands or millions of organisms are required.
- Some bacteria form spores and can live a long time when growth conditions are not just right.
- Viruses do not grow in food. Man is the source of contamination.
- The trichinosis nematode is the most important parasite. It is found in meat not properly cooked.
- Improperly refrigerated fish can become toxic.
- Lemonade in a copper container can become toxic.